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ABSTRACT

This study examined the interpersonal dynamics of participants in special education placement committees serving students with limited English proficiency. The theoretical and conceptual framework of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon was applied to interactions observed in simulated placement committee meetings. Individual decision making related to program options, and student ethnicity, and routinized behaviors was explored. The knowledge base, reasoning, and communication patterns of decision makers were investigated. Results indicated evidence of dysfunctional interpersonal communication that deterred quality reflection and effective problem solving. Fifteen of the 60 subjects were unable to voice potentially crucial concerns because they did not wish to hurt the feelings of others, because they felt inferior to others, or because they were concerned about causing disruptions of the process. Behaviors present in the meetings included one person controlling the meeting and attempts at minimizing or suppressing negative feelings of others. There was a need to promote rational, rule-oriented decision-making. In 7 of 12 placement decisions, eligibility for special education services was based solely on one piece of information. There were frequent references by professionals to "retesting" students until they qualified for specialized programs. Second language issues appeared to cause difficulty for the meeting participants. Implications of the study findings are discussed. (JDD)

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SPECIAL EDUCATION DECISION PROCESSES
FOR ANGLO AND HISPANIC STUDENTS

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The Problem

State and federal special education legal mandates require that race, social background, or economic status of the disabled student should not influence the decision-making process. However, unequal ratios of minority students in special education programs have been reported by the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education for the past fifteen years. Research has recently focused on the overrepresentation of minorities in categorical areas of special education. Gartner and Lipsky (1987) pointed out that:

The growth in the numbers of those categorized as having handicapping conditions was coincidental with the post-Sputnik concern for American competitiveness in the Cold War; young people who failed to keep up with rising standards were categorized as "slow learners," "mentally retarded," "culturally deprived," and "learning disabled." There was a disproportionate percentage of students from minority and low-income families in the first four categories, while White and middle-class students constituted the bulk of students in the last category.

This disproportion suggests that there may be certain underlying assumptions and/or conditions relative to the categorizing and placement of disabled minorities in special education. These differing ratios of representation, or prevalence data, suggest four possible explanations:

1. There is a real difference among races in the proportions of disabled students; or
2. The educational organization and trained professionals therein are not following the same guidelines for both Anglo and minority disabled student; or
3. The same guidelines are being used but the data base available to the decision-makers is inaccurate; or
4. The decision-making committee does not engage in the necessary amount of inquiry, discussion, or public testing of underlying psychological assumptions relative to the intent of P. L. 101-476.

Disproportionate representation of minority children in special education programs is a problem for educational organizations. The provision of equality of educational opportunity is an integral facet of the framework of American society. The concerns of educational leaders related to this issue are:

1. The overrepresentation may reflect racism and an unequal application of the laws of our nation for specific groups of students.
2. Inequality is incongruent with the mission of educational institutions. The task of special education is to provide appropriate instruction to students with correctly diagnosed disabilities regardless of ethnicity.
3. It is not cost-effective for the educational organization to have inappropriately placed students in special programs which are more expensive in both materials and manpower than the regular educational program.

4. Having been inappropriately labelled as disabled is devastating to a student's self-esteem, achievement and future social or employment opportunities.

Despite the requirements of state and federal laws and procedures, imprecision characterizes the identification and placement of disabled students. There is considerable confusion and uncertainty on the part of professional educators when it comes to making eligibility and classification decisions for disabled children. There are time and paperwork pressures within the group decision-making process which have reduced the face-to-face meetings with parents to short get-togethers that are often highlighted by prewritten and undiscussed, poorly interpreted or inappropriate documentation.

Federal and state rules and regulations for implementation of Public Law 101-476 carry a number of explicit or implicit assumptions about the purposes of team or group decision-making. It is assumed, for example, that these meetings will facilitate communication and inquiry between educational professionals and parents.

Another intent of the law is that team and group members reach informed consensus on the legally assigned goals and functions of the decision-making group. Goal clarity in group decision-making is important because it enhances the rational and formal organizational goals. Decision processes are more efficient if each member understands and agrees upon the goals of the meeting. Incongruent perception of goals among group members results in ineffective behaviors such as nit-picking, meandering on tangents and over-use of anecdotes. Personal bias and individual discretion cannot be prevented when members are not in agreement as to the goals and objectives of the special education multidisciplinary meeting.

In summary, Shepard and Smith (1981) outlined the issues and problems often related to students who are referred to and included in special education programs when they noted that:

At least half of the learning disabled population could be more accurately described as slow learners, as children with second-language backgrounds, as children who are naughty in class, as those who are absent more often or move from school to school, or as average learners in above-average school systems.

The Purpose of the Study

P. L. 94-142 and subsequently P.L. 101-476 were enacted to assure equal educational opportunities to all disabled students needing specialized educational instruction regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic background. However, there is evidence in the literature that decision-making for some students has been in error. Even with mandates in the law designed to protect students from inappropriate categorization, disproportionate numbers of students from certain ethnic groups have been labelled as disabled.

The purpose of this study was to examine the interpersonal dynamics of participants in special education placement committees. The theoretical and conceptual framework of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon (1974, 1978) was applied to the interactions observed in simulated placement committee meetings to suggest a possible explanation for decisions reported in the literature relative to limited English proficient students who are referred and placed in special education. Individual decision-making related to program options, student ethnicity, and routinized behaviors were explored. The knowledge-base, reasoning, and communication patterns of decision-makers as they relate to the consequences for effective special education decision-making were investigated.

Argyris and Schon Theory

Argyris and Schon (1974) posit that an increase in the quality and effectiveness of a decision-making group can be achieved through a heightened awareness of the tacit theories or internal belief systems which govern the aculturated behaviors of the individual members of that group. These tacit theories are internalized and become habitual ways of thinking about the world. In other words, they become ingrown and ingrained belief systems. This tacit knowing or reasoning is so habitual that it is often outside of one's conscious awareness. Individuals, when required, use these tacit systems or "espoused beliefs" to describe or justify their actions. The degree to which individuals' espoused beliefs and their overt behaviors or actions match indicates that self-learning and regular monitoring of those actions and behaviors are occurring. The way one openly behaves reflects "theory-in-use." Espoused theory and theory-in-use may be consistent or inconsistent, and the individual may or may not be aware of inconsistencies. Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework of the Argyris and Schon Theory-in-Use Model.

Individuals are driven by a certain set of values, i.e., "governing variables." These governing variables need to be satisfied. For example, people try to maintain a level of anxiety in their lives to alleviate boredom but not high enough to cause too much tension. Thus, man creates action strategies in particular situations to satisfy his governing variables. Action strategies have intended consequences, which man believes will result from his behaviors and in turn match or satisfy his value system.

Consequences of one's behaviors may be intended or unintended, productive or counterproductive, effective for learning or totally ineffective. The consequences of actions depend on the theories-in-use of each individual in an interaction. Being forced to change one's values or governing variables in order to increase the effectiveness of an interaction with others is double-loop learning. A better and more effective group encounter is occurring when double-loop learning is present. In addition, an organization benefits when its individual members and groups choose to more effectively reason together and engage in double-loop learning.

The quality of an effective interaction, determined by an individual's behavior while communicating with others in a group process, is conceptualized by Argyris and Schon as Model I and Model II Theories-in-Use (1974) (Figures 2 and 3). While espoused theories may vary, there is little variance in theories-in-use. Model I reasoning, which Argyris and Schon found to inhibit individual and group learning, is usually characterized as lacking inquiry or illustration, highly routinized and usually based on untested assumptions or attributes about or toward someone or something. The four governing variables of Model I are: (a) achieve the purpose as the actor defines it; (b) win, never lose; (c) suppress negative feelings; and (d) remain rational at all times. The primary strategies are to control and protect the situation from inquiry, evaluation and public testing. The intended or unintended consequences of Model I behaviors include defensiveness, low freedom of choice and reduced production of valid information. Double-loop learning does not occur and effective problem solving is diminished. Within an organization, this may be defined as promoting the status quo, entropy, minimum change, or having the potential for little growth.

Argyris and Schon argue that Model II as an espoused theory is common but the principles embedded in Model II are rarely a theory-in-use. The governing variables of Model II are (a) valid information, (b) free and informed choice, and (c) internal commitment. The behavioral strategies involve sharing control with others who may have technical competence to bring about an improved result. Rather than covering up one's own views or deciding for everyone, Model II reasoning is exemplified by increased mutual inquiry and the illustration or public testing of underlying assumptions and beliefs. The consequences of this strategy result in minimal defensiveness, high freedom of choice and high risk-taking. Double-loop learning is enhanced and a more effective problem-solving interaction is possible. The implications for organizations are clear. The framework for the sharing of ideas and creativity is in place and the potential for personal and organizational expansion and growth increases.

Outcomes of This Study

This study attempted to capture the reasoning behaviors of special education decision-makers related to the theoretical constructs of the Argyris and Schon Model I and Model II Theory-in-Use. The responses and action strategies of the subjects confirmed a reasoning pattern that can be defined as predominantly Model I in nature. There was evidence of dysfunctional interpersonal communication that deterred quality reflection and effective problem-solving. Fifteen of the sixty subjects were unable to voice potentially crucial concerns or information in the simulation meetings because they did not wish to hurt the feelings of others, because they were feeling inferior to others, or because they were concerned about causing disruptions of the process. The governing values of Model I behavior such as: one person controlling the meeting, attempts at minimizing or suppressing negative feelings of others, and the need to promote rational, rule-oriented decision-making were clearly present in the meetings.

Communication was apparently distorted because individuals assigned negative attributes to others, evaluated others with little data, and tested underlying assumptions of others only within their own minds. Various assumptions about the student being discussed and/or the special education decision-making process were never publicly expressed. For example, one participant noted in a post-decision interview that "language development is not really a problem [for this student], she could tell you all the steps in the welfare process and how to get the check cashed." Two of the three principals participating in the study simulations mentioned that, while it was important to be very careful not to confuse a language delay and a true learning disability, it would be in the best interest of the student to be placed in a special education program rather than remaining in the regular second grade classroom. There was no evidence of any discussion about the life-long implications of labeling or the possibility that second language acquisition problems were being confused with a disabling condition.

Interestingly, in seven of twelve decisions, eligibility for special education services was based solely on one piece of data. This suggests a need for more careful decision-making. A one standard deviation spread of fifteen points between scores on intelligence and achievement test instruments, and third-hand information indicating that a student was only producing one or two word sentences when eighteen months old were used as the basis for decisions. Whether test data were valid for these students was never discussed in the meetings. Furthermore, there was no discussion about the reliability of referral information in any of the meetings.

Other distortions in communication centered around the idea of "the hidden agenda." For example, during the meetings, some of the subjects asked why the student was not tested in Spanish and in the interviews stated that they were upset that the committee did not thoroughly discuss how second language acquisition issues might have affected a student's language development. This was a form of "saving face" or sublimation, a method Argyris describes as trying to discuss or raise personal or hidden agenda issues without actually discussing them. In this way, the subject can say that the rest of the group did not want to discuss it. Therefore, they are not responsible for the decision since they tried to raise an important issue and no one listened or actively engaged in discussion of the issue.

Analysis of the discussions indicated that some subjects did not seem to want to take responsibility for the decisions. They said that they were content with the decision that "they" (the group) made. For example, in the interviews, most of the parents and teachers said that they deferred to the expertise of others.

Frequently, one person seemed to control the interactions. For two of the three groups, the principal directed and dominated the interactions. Analysis of the third group revealed that, while the principal did not actually seem to be directing the discussions, the opinions of the principal were central to the final decisions about categorization and placement.

On average, decision-making discussions for Hispanic students took nearly twice as long as those of "Anglo" students. It should be noted that the "Anglo" students used in this study were actually Hispanic with second language information removed from the assessment reports. While additional time was used to arrive at decisions for Hispanic students, analysis of these interactions revealed that second language issues appeared to cause difficulty for these professionals. In one meeting, the diagnostician stated that variance between English and Spanish assessment results was an "enigma" for her. Further examples indicating lack of knowledge about second language concerns are revealed when professionals espoused that oral language development seemed to really be the problem exhibited by most of these students. After stating this point, the only evidence used to support this observation was that the student was Hispanic. For the "Anglo" students, oral language development, as a separate issue, was not singled out as a problem in any case.

There were frequent references by these professionals to "retesting" students until they qualified for specialized programs. This action strategy was couched in the belief that removing a student from the regular classroom results in better educational opportunities for the student. In reality, statements like these reflect an expectation effect, and result in the "over-testing" or placement of normal students in special education. These "test-until-they qualify" remarks and the espoused beliefs of the second grade teachers that they could not provide the necessary interventions for students were prevalent themes. Assumptions related to the validity of the assessment instruments, the quality of alternative interventions, and the consequences of labeling were never publicly questioned. An equally viable assumption that was not discussed was the regular education system's apparent inability or unwillingness to adjust or modify its programs to students who may be unlike the norm, such as the linguistically or culturally different.

The subjects in this study were well-meaning, experienced professionals. They were fully aware that the decision-making meetings were being recorded. It might be hypothesized that the tacit knowledge that informed the actions of these subjects had been skillfully internalized such that performance within the context of these simulated meetings had become routine and second-nature to the subjects.

There were, in fact, some instances where subjects tried to consciously reflect upon their actions, to seek confirming or disconfirming data and engage in thoughtful inquiry without making inferential leaps within the context of the information they were presented. For example, one subject asked why a student scored higher on an English version of an assessment rather than the Spanish version when other data seemed to indicate the student was having difficulty in English reading. No one in the meeting had the expertise to respond to this concern and the ultimate decision to seek more testing reflects this dilemma. Another example related to an expressed need for a bilingual special education program to meet a particular student's needs. The need was later discounted because that type of program did not exist at the school. It may be argued that the

principal was making a "satisfying" decision to leave a student in a neighborhood setting rather than seeking to move the student to a school where a program that might better meet student needs could be provided. On the other hand, it is possible that the principal decided to not promote a needed service because it would be costly.

Subjects noted that, in practice, pre-meetings are held so that some pre-planning can take place to "present a united front to parents." This opportunity to collude was not available for these simulations. In fact, these groups were involved in what could be described as "best practices" because they knew they were being closely observed and studied and had no "pre-decisioning opportunities." The Model I reasoning displayed by these professionals, who were trying to do the best they could for these students with no apparent motivation to distort the process, demonstrates how strongly the tacitly-embedded and culturally-normed theories-in-use are evident within the special education decision-making environment. It was outside the conscious awareness of the subjects that they were engaging in systematically skillful actions that, for them, had become effective, effortless, and performed without the need to think about how the decision-making should be accomplished.

There is a public and commonly held perception that the multidisciplinary meeting is the instrument within P.L. 101-476 that will serve and protect the rights of all students. If these simulations are an example, or a snapshot, of the best practice of this process, the individual interests of linguistically and culturally different students may not be fully served.

Implications

What does this mean for the individual members of the multidisciplinary team of decision-makers in special education? The principal or administrator should encourage shared, democratic and participatory decision-making. Additionally, this powerful individual within the school must not behave in ways which serve to diminish open and useful debate or communicate a lack of importance or concern for the decision-making process. Referring and placing students in special education programs as a panacea for problems within the regular classroom must not be encouraged. The habitual referral of students who may exhibit behaviors different from the norm of a particular student population must be questioned. High referral rates and unsubstantiated learning problems reported by teachers should be thoroughly evaluated. Alternative learning environments, varying teaching styles, and appropriate curricula should be encouraged for all students, rather than automatically referring "slow," or difficult students to special education programs. As a matter of good educational practice, underlying assumptions about regular and special education programs and the type of interventions that may be provided should be challenged and questioned. For example, a prereferral policy might be instituted which systematically requires documentation that alternative, "outside-the-child," interventions involving instruction, environments, and teachers have been attempted to remedy learning difficulties rather than assuming the problem only exists within the student.

Parents must be given equal status in the decision-making process. Atmospheres that promote fear and intimidation must be eliminated. Collaborative problem-solving associated with genuine understanding and concern for the individual student and their family is the intent of P.L. 101-476. The law needs to be amended so that parents are given the opportunity to have, at the expense of the school district, a student advocate who is specially trained to enhance collaborative decision-making. It may be necessary to give parents greater power to veto or negotiate decisions that do not reflect problem-solving or collaboration.

Teachers should be trained to better understand linguistically and culturally different students to adjust instruction for them to facilitate success. Teachers should share information about "what works" so that each professional can learn from the positive results of others. This is especially true between teachers with knowledge in specialized areas and the regular classroom teacher. It is not in the best interest of students to not share promising interventions, technical or pedagogical expertise, and innovative materials among educational professionals. Consultation and collaborative problem-solving among teachers, including special education teachers, must be promoted. Assumptions that one-on-one teaching is only possible in special classes and that regular classroom teachers lack the skills to handle diversity should be challenged.

Professionals involved with the psychoeducational assessment of students must be kept aware that tests that are not standardized on certain ethnic or socio-economic groups are not valid when used or interpreted as normed tests. Since test results influence decisions, the assessment specialist must promote open discussion of results.

This study seems to confirm and support the research of Argyris and School and their colleagues. The application of the theory-in-use models to group interactions has been useful because these conceptual frameworks have served as a "template" to analyze and describe the quality and effectiveness of the special education decision-making process.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to offer a pragmatic and useful explanation for the decisions made about the eligibility and placement of linguistically and culturally diverse students suspected of having disabling conditions. The behaviors described in the simulated decision-making experiences indicate a pattern of systematic strategies and defensive routines that clearly illustrate the Argyris and Schon Model I Theory-in-Use. The results, along with examples of these patterns of behavior, were mapped and illustrated.

The judgment and reasoning process involved in the identification, assessment, and placement of students with suspected disabling conditions involves both conscious and unconscious decisions. The decision process entails many uncertainties relative to the individual perspectives of the participants and the sources of information used to make those decisions. Factors such as experience, redundancy,

habit, education, or intra-group dynamics can, when taken together or in part, play a key role in this complex decision-making process. The possibility of bias related to the student's sex, race, socio-economic status, or background may not be articulated, yet be present. Studies of clinical judgment have been found to be rather unreliable, unstable, and to lack true consensus. This study confirms the hypotheses that the special education decision-making process is basically "hit and miss," even when the professional judges are presented with the best information and the most explicit guidelines.

This study also supports the findings that the decisions were driven by the referral data provided by the classroom teachers and the decision-making committee seldom inquired further into the underlying assumptions, assessments, or unique characteristics of the students being considered. There was simply a "knee-jerk" response to the referral report.

In addition to supporting other findings, this study suggests the need for increased training across various educational disciplines that interact with students who are linguistically and culturally different. The special education field has made a heavy investment in technical practices. By having a monopoly on the expertise involved in the interpretation of assessment and specialized interventions, special educators have set themselves apart from their other school colleagues. This study supports the need to strive for a more shared involvement in the decision-making processes for students suspected of being disabled.

Finally, in this age of educational reform, current mandates that have resulted in the raising of performance standards for the nation's schools may result in increased numbers of students considered to be "different" by the regular educational system. Additionally, the emerging population of students is heterogeneous, significantly non-White, increasingly disadvantaged, of lower socio-economic status, and from widely varying cultural and language backgrounds. This study suggests that implementing more effective decision-making practices is vitally important for the future of this emerging group of students, the schools, and the nation.

Figure 1.

Argyris and Schon Theory-In-Use Model.

10	Governing Variables	Action Strategies	Consequences
	espoused beliefs values	behaviors to satisfy governing variables	intended unintended productive counterproductive
Quality of Effectiveness			
Model I		Model II	
single-loop learning status quo entropy		double-loop learning change growth	

Figure 2.

Model I Theory-In-Use.

Governing Variables	Action Strategies	Consequences for the behavioral world	Consequences for learning
Define goals and try to achieve them.	Design and manage the environment unilaterally (be persuasive, appeal to larger goals).	Actor seen as defensive, inconsistent, incongruent, competitive, controlling, fearful of being vulnerable, overly concerned about self and others or unconcerned about others, withholding of feelings.	Self-sealing
Maximize winning and minimize losing.	Own and control the task (be guardian of definition and execution of task).	Defensive interpersonal and group relationship (dependence on one, little helping others).	Single-loop learning.
Minimize generating or expressing negative feelings.	Protect self (speak with inferred categories along with no observable behavior, reduce incongruity by defensive actions such as blaming, stereotyping, suppressing feelings, intellectualizing).	Defensive norms (mistrust, lack of risk-taking, conformity, external commitment, emphasis on diplomacy).	Little testing of theories publicly. Much testing privately.
Be rational.	Protect others from being hurt (withhold info., create rules to censor information and behavior, hold private meetings).	Low freedom of choice, internal commitment and risk-taking.	

Figure 3.

Model II Theory-In-Use.

Governing Variables	Action Strategies	Consequences for the behavioral world	Consequences for learning
Valid information.	Design situations where participants experience high causality (psychological success, essentiality).	Minimally defensive (facilitator, collaborator, choice creator).	Disconfirming processes. More positive (high freedom of choice and authenticity).
12 Free, informed choice.	Tasks are controlled jointly.	Minimal interpersonal defensive relations and group dynamics.	Double-loop learning.
Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of its implementation.	Protection of self is jointly done and oriented toward growth and bilateral protection of others.	Learning-oriented norms (trust, open confrontation on difficult issues).	Public testing of theories. More effective problem solving and decisioning, especially for difficult problems

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